WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1.   A system providing seller pre-qualification during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, comprising:

a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class categorizing a plurality of products and defining one or more attributes of the products categorized in the product class;

one or more pointers for each product class, each pointer identifying a seller database in which product data enabling a product transaction is stored for products categorized in the product class, each seller database associated with a seller having values for one or more seller attributes; and

a search interface operable to communicate, in response to selection of a product class and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers having seller attribute values matching the specified seller attribute criteria, these seller databases being identified by the one or more pointers associated with the selected product class.

2.   The system of Claim 1, wherein a seller attribute is selected from the group consisting of geographic restrictions, currencies accepted, level of buyer credit required, collaboration tools accepted, types of contracts accepted, and contract terms accepted.

3.   The system of Claim 1, wherein the selection of the product class is made automatically according to a buyer profile for a buyer.

4.   The system of Claim 1, wherein the specification of the seller attribute criteria is made automatically according to a buyer profile for a buyer.

5.   The system of Claim 1, wherein the search interface is operable to communicate a search query in response to specification of one or more product attribute criteria in addition to selection of a product class and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria.

6. The system of Claim 1, wherein seller attribute values for a seller are stored in the associated seller database along with product data.

5   7. The system of Claim 1, wherein the search interface is further operable to communicate, in response to at least selection of the product class, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in a buyer profile.

10   8. The system of Claim 7, wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous search requests.

          9. The system of Claim 7, wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous electronic transactions 15 involving the buyer.

          10. The system of Claim 7, wherein:

the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria; and

the search interface automatically updates the buyer profile at certain time 20 intervals by eliminating from the buyer profile sellers no longer having seller attribute values matching the listed seller attribute criteria and adding to the buyer profile sellers having seller attribute values matching the listed seller attribute criteria.

11.   A system providing seller pre-qualification during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, comprising:

a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class corresponding to a plurality of products having in common one or more product attributes, each product in a product class being defined by a product attribute value for each product attribute for the product class, each product being further defined by a seller attribute value for each of one or more seller attributes, the seller attribute values for a product being associated with a particular seller from which the product may be purchased;

a search interface operable to communicate to one or more seller databases a search query for product data in response to selection of a product class, specification of one or more product attribute criteria, and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria; and

a presentation interface operable to communicate search results in response to the search query, the search results comprising product data for one or more products within the selected product class with product attribute values matching the specified product attribute criteria and with seller attribute values matching the specified product attribute criteria.

12.   The system of Claim 11, wherein a seller attribute is selected from the group consisting of geographic restrictions, currencies accepted, level of buyer credit required, collaboration tools accepted, types of contracts accepted, and contract terms accepted.

13.   The system of Claim 11, wherein the search interface is further operable to communicate, in response to at least selection of the product class, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in a buyer profile.

14. A method of pre-qualifying sellers during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, comprising:

making accessible to at least one buyer computer a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class categorizing a plurality of products and defining one or more attributes of the products categorized in the product class, one or more pointers being provided for each product class, each pointer identifying a seller database in which product data enabling a product transaction is stored for products categorized in the product class, each seller database associated with a seller having values for one or more seller attributes; and

communicating, in response to selection of a product class and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers having seller attribute values matching the specified seller attribute criteria, these seller databases being identified by the one or more pointers associated with the selected product class.

15. The method of Claim 14, wherein a seller attribute is selected from the group consisting of geographic restrictions, currencies accepted, level of buyer credit required, collaboration tools accepted, types of contracts accepted, and contract terms accepted.

16. The method of Claim 14, wherein the selection of the product class is made automatically according to a buyer profile for a buyer.

17. The method of Claim 14, wherein the specification of the seller attribute criteria is made automatically according to a buyer profile for a buyer.

18. The method of Claim 14, further comprising communicating a search query in response to specification of one or more product attribute criteria in addition to selection of a product class and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria.

19.   The method of Claim 14, wherein seller attribute values for a seller are stored in the associated seller database along with product data.

20.   The method of Claim 14, further comprising communicating, in response to at least selection of the product class, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in a buyer profile.

21.   The method of Claim 20, wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous search requests.

22.   The method of Claim 20, wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous electronic transactions involving the buyer.

23.   The method of Claim 20:

wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria; and

the method further comprising automatically updating the buyer profile at certain time intervals by eliminating from the buyer profile sellers no longer having seller attribute values matching the listed seller attribute criteria and adding to the buyer profile sellers having seller attribute values matching the listed seller attribute criteria.

24.   A method of pre-qualifying sellers during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, comprising:

providing a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class corresponding to a plurality of products having in common one or more product attributes, each product in a product class being defined by a product attribute value for each product attribute for the product class, each product being further defined by a seller attribute value for each of one or more seller attributes, the seller attribute values for a product being associated with a particular seller from which the product may be purchased;

communicating to one or more seller databases a search query for product data in response to selection of a product class, specification of one or more product attribute criteria, and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria; and

communicating search results in response to the search query, the search results comprising product data for one or more products within the selected product class with product attribute values matching the specified product attribute criteria and with seller attribute values matching the specified product attribute criteria.

25.   The method of Claim 24, wherein a seller attribute is selected from the group consisting of geographic restrictions, currencies accepted, level of buyer credit required, collaboration tools accepted, types of contracts accepted, and contract terms accepted.

26.   The method of Claim 24, further comprising communicating, in response to at least selection of the product class, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in a buyer profile.

27.   Software providing seller pre-qualification during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, the software embodied in a computer-readable medium and when executed operable to:

make accessible to at least one buyer computer a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class categorizing a plurality of products and defining one or more attributes of the products categorized in the product class, one or more pointers being provided for each product class, each pointer identifying a seller database in which product data enabling a product transaction is stored for products categorized in the product class, each seller database associated with a seller having values for one or more seller attributes; and

communicate, in response to selection of a product class and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers having seller attribute values matching the specified seller attribute criteria, these seller databases being identified by the one or more pointers associated with the selected product class.

28.   The software of Claim 27, wherein a seller attribute is selected from the group consisting of geographic restrictions, currencies accepted, level of buyer credit required, collaboration tools accepted, types of contracts accepted, and contract terms accepted.

29.   The software of Claim 27, wherein the selection of the product class is made automatically according to a buyer profile for a buyer.

30.   The software of Claim 27, wherein the specification of the seller attribute criteria is made automatically according to a buyer profile for a buyer.

31.   The software of Claim 27, wherein the software is further operable to communicate a search query in response to specification of one or more product attribute criteria in addition to selection of a product class and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria.

32.   The software of Claim 29, wherein seller attribute values for a seller are stored in the associated seller database along with product data.

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33.   The software of Claim 29, wherein the software is further operable to communicate, in response to at least selection of the product class, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in a buyer profile.

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34.   The software of Claim 33, wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous search requests.

35.   The software of Claim 33, wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous electronic transactions involving the buyer.

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36.   The software of Claim 33:

wherein the buyer profile comprises a list of seller attribute criteria; and

the software is further operable to automatically update the list of sellers at certain time intervals by eliminating from the list sellers not having seller attribute values matching the listed seller attribute criteria and adding to the list sellers having seller attribute values matching the listed seller attribute criteria.

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37. Software providing seller pre-qualification during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, the software embodied in a computer-readable medium and when executed operable to:

provide a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class corresponding to a plurality of products having in common one or more product attributes, each product in a product class being defined by a product attribute value for each product attribute for the product class, each product being further defined by a seller attribute value for each of one or more seller attributes, the seller attribute values for a product being associated with a particular seller from which the product may be purchased;

communicate to one or more seller databases a search query for product data in response to selection of a product class, specification of one or more product attribute criteria, and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria; and

communicate search results in response to the search query, the search results comprising product data for one or more products within the selected product class with product attribute values matching the specified product attribute criteria and with seller attribute values matching the specified product attribute criteria. ·

38. The software of Claim 37, wherein a seller attribute is selected from the group consisting of geographic restrictions, currencies accepted, level of buyer credit required, collaboration tools accepted, types of contracts accepted, and contract terms accepted.

39. The software of Claim 37, further comprising communicating, in response to at least selection of the product class, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in a buyer profile for a buyer.

40.   A system providing seller pre-qualification during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, comprising:

means for hierarchically organizing a plurality of product classes, each product class categorizing a plurality of products and defining one or more attributes of the products categorized in the product class; search

means, for each product class, for identifying a seller database in which product data enabling a product transaction is stored for products categorized in the product class, each seller database associated with a seller having values for one or more seller attributes; and

means for communicating, in response to selection of a product class and specification of one or more seller attribute criteria, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers having seller attribute values matching the specified seller attribute criteria, these seller databases being identified using the means for identifying associated with the selected product class.

41.   A system providing seller pre-qualification during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, comprising:

a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class categorizing a plurality of products and defining one or more attributes of the products categorized in the product class;

one or more pointers for each product class, each pointer identifying a seller database in which product data enabling a product transaction is stored for products categorized in the product class, each seller database associated with a seller having values for one or more seller attributes; and

a search interface operable to communicate, in response to selection of a product class, automatic specification of one or more seller attribute criteria according to a buyer profile, and automatic specification of one or more product attribute criteria according to the buyer profile, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in the buyer profile and having seller attribute values matching the specified seller attribute criteria, these seller databases being identified by the one or more pointers associated with the selected product class, the buyer profile comprising a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous search requests or one or more previous electronic transactions involving the buyer.

42.   A method of pre-qualifying sellers during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, comprising:

making accessible to at least one buyer computer a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class categorizing a plurality of products and defining one or more attributes of the products categorized in the product class, one or more pointers being provided for each product class, each pointer identifying a seller database in which product data enabling a product transaction is stored for products categorized in the product class, each seller database associated with a seller having values for one or more seller attributes; and

communicating, in response to selection of a product class, automatic specification of one or more seller attribute criteria according to a buyer profile, and automatic specification of one or more product attribute criteria according to the buyer profile, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in the buyer profile and having seller attribute values matching the specified seller attribute criteria, these seller databases being identified by the one or more pointers associated with the selected product class, the buyer profile comprising a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous search requests or one or more previous electronic transactions involving the buyer.

43. Software providing seller pre-qualification during the matching phase of an electronic commerce transaction, the software embodied in a computer-readable medium and when executed operable to:

make accessible to at least one buyer computer a directory structure comprising a plurality of hierarchically organized product classes, each product class categorizing a plurality of products and defining one or more attributes of the products categorized in the product class, one or more pointers being provided for each product class, each pointer identifying a seller database in which product data enabling a product transaction is stored for products categorized in the product class, each seller database associated with a seller having values for one or more seller attributes; and

communicate, in response to selection of a product class, automatic specification of one or more seller attribute criteria according to a buyer profile, and automatic specification of one or more product attribute criteria according to the buyer profile, a search query for product data only to one or more seller databases associated with sellers identified in the buyer profile and having seller attribute values matching the specified seller attribute criteria, these seller databases being identified by the one or more pointers associated with the selected product class, the buyer profile comprising a list of seller attribute criteria compiled based on one or more previous search requests or one or more previous electronic transactions involving the buyer.